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ABSTRACT

An exploratory study investigated the relationship between students' achievement in and perceptions of a freshman composition course based on the collaborative skill rehearsal model. This model involves preparation for writing through rehearsal, in small group activities, of skills students will need to successfully complete their individual work. Fourteen sections of the composition course were included in the study, which was conducted at a small university in the Rocky Mountain region. In the first sample, 335 students completed a survey assessing their perceptions of four major areas of the course: assignments, group work, tutorial sessions at a writing center, and progress on specific skills. Scores on four assignments used by participating instructors were included in the analysis. In the following term, another sample was obtained from 321 students. Results were analyzed separately for the two samples. In general, responses to course methods were favorable, although ratings of the first sample were significantly higher overall. Strong correlations were found between overall satisfaction and total score on the four essays, as well as between essay scores and both self-rated academic writing skill and frequency of visits to the writing center. (ARH)

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PROCESS AND PRODUCT IN SMALL GROUP WRITING INSTRUCTION:
A MULTIVARIATE APPROACH

Joanne Kurfiss

1. Objectives

This study investigated relationships between college students' achievement in a writing course (product) and their perceptions of specific features of instruction that uses small group work to teach cognitive processes and skills relevant to writing (process). The study was exploratory in nature; methods were descriptive and correlational rather than experimental. In addition to studying process-product relationships, I wanted to assess the usefulness of quantitative data as feedback to faculty who are untrained in quantitative methods.

2. Perspectives

Group learning models have recently become popular in writing instruction, particularly at the college level. Often referred to as "collaborative learning" (for example, see Bruffee, 1984), small group instruction actually appears in two distinguishable forms. Probably the most common form is the draft workshop or peer review model. In this model, students exchange drafts of their individual essays and provide each other with suggestions for revision. In contrast, the skill rehearsal model emphasizes preparati on for writing through rehearsal, in small group activities, of skills students will need to successfully complete their individual work. The skill rehearsal method usually involves a group product (such as a list of ideas, a sample paragraph, or a consensus decision) which is shared with the rest of the class. Students receive immediate feedback in a teacher-led discusssion (Wiener, 1986).

Both of these models use a cooperative task structure, but neither involves explicit group incentives such as those described by Slavin (1983)

and Michaelson et al. (1984-85) and favored by college students in a study by Feichtner and Davis (1984-85). Nontheless, both are effective in developing students' writing skills at the secondary and college level; though less commonly used, the skill rehearsal model appears to be superior to the draft workshop method (Hillocks, 1984). This paper reports on a study of writing instruction using the collaborative skill rehearsal model in freshman writing classes. The study examines students' perceptions of the course and relates their perceptions to self-rated progress on course goals and to their achievements on assignments in the course.

3. Methods and Data Sources

Fourteen sections of freshman composition were included in the study, which was conducted at a small university in the Rocky Mountain region. The course departs from tradition in several respects. First, sections are unusually large, generally 50-60 students. Second, assignments are drawn from a common set; each essay is blind-scored by two trained raters whose scoring reliability is checked periodically in norming sessions. No comments are written on essays; students must consult the instructor or a tutor at the writing center for specific feedback on their essays. Third, instructors are expected to use small group work for at least 50% of all instructional time. Classes are scheduled in two-hour blocks to facilitate group work.

With the help of the writing program staff, I designed a comprehensive survey to assess students' perceptions of four major areas of the College Writing course: Assignments, Group Work, the Writing Center, and Progress on Specific Skills. In addition, a Background Information section and several other items assessed students' involvement in the course.

To facilitate matching survey data with scores on assignments, students completing the survey used identification codes which corresponded to those used in scoring their essays. Scores on four assignments used by

participating instructors were included in the analysis.

During fall and winter term, six instructors volunteered to participate in the survey; a total of 335 students completed the form (Sample 1). Four instructors provided scores on essays in addition to survey data. Results were analyzed and a summary report presented to all writing program faculty early in spring term. In addition, all participants received an individual profile report, indicating items on which their sections differed significantly from the sample mean. Sample 2, obtained in spring quarter, included 321 students from eight sections. Summary reports were again prepared for program staff and individual participant feedback.

4. Results

Results were analyzed separately for the two samples. Essay score data have been analyzed only for three sections of the fall/winter sample; essay data are now being collected for Sample 2.

Although three instructors had sections included in both samples, significant differences (.01 or better) were found between the two samples on the majority of student background variables, instructional variables, and progress ratings. All differences favored the fall/winter sample. Significant differences were <u>not</u> found on items pertaining to patterns of writing center use and satisfaction.

Although means differed significantly between the two samples on most survey items, the rank ordering of items within clusters on a particular topic varied only slightly for the two samples. These clusters include benefits of journal writing, helpfulness of groups in several skill development areas, importance of specific group strategies, and progress toward specific skill goals. For example, in both samples, students found group work most helpful in learning to see both sides of an issue and in giving draft feedback; groups were seen as least helpful in learning to develop ideas.

Analyzing correlations between all survey items and essay scores from three sections yielded encouraging preliminary results. All relationships are in the desired direction, and clusters of theoretically related items show strong statistical relationships. For example, Sample 1 showed a strong and not unexpected relationship between overall satisfaction and total score on four common essays ($r=.304$, $p=.000$). A still stronger relationship was found between scores and self-rated academic writing skill ($r=.425$). Two important correlations were related to writing center use: the earlier a student's first visit to the writing center, and the more frequent the visits, the higher her essay score was likely to be ($p=.001$). Overall satisfaction with progress in the course was also strongly related to writing center use, as well as to self-rated participation in small group work and priority given to the course. Students who did well tended to have a generally positive view of the assignments and felt they benefited in a variety of ways from keeping journals for the course. They also reported increased confidence in their writing skill and interest in future courses requiring writing. These relationships among survey variables were upheld in the spring sample. Further analysis will include regressions on essay scores when all spring quarter essay data have been collected.

In general, responses to course methods were favorable, although as indicated, ratings of the fall/winter sample were significantly higher overall. Students in both samples reported that the majority of class time was indeed spent in group work, and the majority preferred it that way. Furthermore, students reported more favorable attitudes toward group work at the end of the term than they claimed to have had initially. Thus despite the lack of explicit incentives for group work, students felt that group work was valuable, that they progressed in the course, and overall, that they were satisfied with their experiences in the course.

5. Educational Importance

Investigations of the skill rehearsal method are particularly important because it is a relatively uncommon but very promising form of collaborative learning. This project has already yielded detailed information on students' perceptions of particular aspects of a skill rehearsal approach to collaborative learning, and has prompted plans to develop and test cooperative incentive structures appropriate for writing instruction. Findings from studies of collaborative learning in writing instruction may also suggest instructional strategies that could be applied in other disciplines, where more research on this important methodology is also lacking.

The project is also important as an example of communication between social scientists and faculty who have not been trained in statistical methods. Staff involvement in designing the survey seems to have heightened interest in the results obtained. Program staff used the results in discussions of needed program improvements, for individual teaching assessment, and to generate hypotheses for further research. All participants responded positively to the project, in spite of the time-consuming and quantitative nature of the methodology.

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